

# Dirty Hands

## by David Owen

*A cheating scandal in the world of professional bridge*

In 2010, Lotan Fisher and Ron Schwartz – Israeli bridge players in their early twenties – were members of the team that won the World Junior Teams Championship. The following year, their team won the European Youth Bridge Team Championships and they were invited to compete in a number of tournaments that included most of the world's top players. During the next few years, they finished at or near the top in a remarkable number of those tournaments.

Bridge is a card game for four people. Like doubles tennis, it's played two on two – although at a bridge table the partners sit opposite each other. (The seats are designated by compass points: North-South versus East-West.) There are many millions of players worldwide, and major tournaments attract thousands of entrants, but the arrival of new talent is a cause for celebration, because older players often worry that the game is aging into extinction. Successful young players stand out for another reason, too: bridge, unlike chess, has never been dominated by prodigies. 'The game is hugely experience-based,' Gavin Wolpert, a top professional and a co-founder of an influential Web site, Bridgewinners.com, told me recently. He's thirty-three years old – an age that, in the bridge world, counts as something like late adolescence. 'The longer you play, the better you get at making good decisions, because you've seen it before. When you're young, you don't walk in and suddenly start winning every event.'

Yet Fisher and Schwartz were more than holding their own against some of the best partnerships in the world. They often made the kinds of plays that are fun to read about later, in bridge publications, because the intuition and reasoning can seem almost Sherlockian. The best players are able to deduce the presence of particular cards in opponents' hands long before those cards have been exposed in play, based on what's happened so far, and they think like oddsmakers. One of the longest chapters in the American Contract Bridge League's 'Encyclopedia of Bridge' lists precise probabilities for alternative approaches to playing hundreds of specific combinations of cards. No one would try to memorize all the percentages, but every skilled player acquires an increasingly comprehensive sense of what's likely to work and what isn't.

Last summer, at an international event in Chicago, Boye Brogeland, a Norwegian player, became convinced that Fisher and Schwartz had made prescient bids and plays that they couldn't have found with skilful sleuthing alone. 'Bridge is such a logical game,' he told me. 'When you do a lot of strange things in a very short period of time, and those strange things are successful – it just doesn't happen.' He spent hours studying records of hands that he and his partner had played against Fisher and Schwartz, and concluded that they had been cheating. 'I just didn't know how they were doing it,' he said. (Fisher and Schwartz have denied all the allegations.)

Brogeland is in his early forties. He has blond hair, much of which often seems to be sticking straight up, and a more athletic build than most of the world's best bridge players. (At major tournaments, the relatively few players who look as though they've spent much time outside tend to be the smokers.) Brogeland had been a teammate of Fisher and Schwartz during the two previous tournament cycles, on a six-player team sponsored by a retired American businessman. (Tournament teams typically consist of three pairs.) On several occasions during that period, he told me, he had questioned them about their results on certain hands, which he felt they had played with uncanny precision. 'I asked them, 'What was your logic on this hand?' ' he recalled later. 'They always had a quick answer, but their responses still kept me on my toes.' Now that he had competed against them, he was convinced that they were secretly exchanging information about their cards. He shared his suspicions with several other players. 'Boye was steaming,' Wolpert said. 'But I told him to do this the right way. Don't go around saying they're cheating – you need to get the evidence.'

All the major bridge organizations have protocols for dealing with allegations of unethical behavior, but the organizations have often been ineffective in the past, and Brogeland feared they'd do nothing. Instead, he posted a comment in a thread on Bridgewinners.com in which he said that he and three of his teammates from the previous two years had decided to give ►



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up everything they had won together – something that he said all players should do if they believe their team includes ‘a cheating pair.’ This wasn’t a veiled accusation, since Fisher and Schwartz were the only teammates he didn’t name. Jeff Meckstroth – an American bridge superstar for almost four decades – told me, ‘Boye had balls as big as church bells to be doing what he was doing.’ And Brogeland wasn’t finished. Within a few weeks, what began as a single accusation had grown into a major scandal, involving the highest levels of international play.

Bridge evolved from whist, a similar but simpler game, which dates to at least the early seventeen-hundreds. In both, a card is played from each of the four hands in succession, and the resulting four-card ‘trick’ is won either by the highest card in the suit that was led or by the highest card in the ‘trump’ suit – a designated supersuit, which defeats all others. This sounds straightforward until you try it. One of the reasons bridge continues to fascinate players all over the world is that, in order to become even sort of good at it, you have to be willing to be bad at it for a long time.

In whist, the trump suit is determined by exposing the last card in the deck; in bridge, the trump suit is decided by an auction, which the four players conduct before revealing any of their cards. The auction also establishes how many tricks the auction’s winner will have to take in order to earn a positive score – a target known as the contract. (Some auctions result in a ‘no-trump’ contract, meaning that the hand will be played without a supersuit.) The game’s modern version, called contract bridge, is usually attributed to Harold S. Vanderbilt, who, during an ocean cruise in 1925, devised several transformative improvements to the scoring system of the previous version, auction bridge. His ideas caught on with extraordinary speed, and within a few years auction bridge had all but disappeared.

In tournaments and at bridge clubs, identical hands are played at all tables, and each pair’s or team’s score is based on how well it does relative to others playing the same cards – a form of the game known as duplicate, one of

whose purposes is to reduce the role of luck. At each table, the player whose bid initiates the final contract is called the declarer. His opponents are called the defenders, and the play begins when the defender sitting to the left of the declarer turns one of his cards face up on the table – a potentially momentous play, called the opening lead. The declarer’s partner now lays all his own cards on the table, also face up (and, optionally, excuses himself to go outside for a cigarette); his hand, called the dummy, is played not by him but by the declarer, in addition to his own.

There are many legitimate ways in which players exchange information about their hands, during both bidding and play. Some bidding sequences, known as bidding conventions, have artificial meanings. One of the most widely used is Blackwood (named for the man who invented it), in which a bid of ‘four no-trump’ asks the bidder’s partner to reveal how many aces he holds: a response of ‘five clubs’ means no aces (or all four), ‘five diamonds’ means one ace, ‘five hearts’ means two aces, ‘five spades’ means three. Over the decades, Blackwood has spawned many variations, some of them quite complicated. My regular bridge partners and I occasionally allow beginning players to use a simple version, which we call Friedman Blackwood, after our late friend John Friedman, who was always forgetting the responses. (You answer by holding up fingers.)

For the defenders, the play of the hand is governed by conventions known as carding agreements. The oldest, which dates to the early days of whist, is to lead the fourth-highest card when playing from a long suit. If you know that that’s what your partner’s doing, you can apply the so-called Rule of Eleven: subtract the rank of the led card from eleven, and the result is the number of higher cards in that suit which are contained in the other three hands. Since you can see two of those hands (your own and the dummy), you now know the exact distribution of all the higher cards. One reason this isn’t cheating is that the declarer can read and exploit the signal, too, since he can also see two of the four hands. In bridge, all agree-

ments must be transparent; secret understandings between partners are not allowed. Tournament players reveal their agreements on a printed form, which their opponents can examine, and if an opponent is confused by something, during either the bidding or the play, he can ask for an explanation at his next turn.

Expert poker players often take advantage of a skill they call table feel: an ability to read the facial expressions and other unconscious ‘tells’ exhibited by their opponents. Bridge players rely on table feel, too, but in bridge not all tells can be exploited legally by all players. If one of my opponents hesitates during the bidding or the play, I’m allowed to draw conclusions from the hesitation – but if my partner hesitates I’m not. What’s more, if I seem to have taken advantage of information that I wasn’t authorized to know, my opponents can summon the tournament director and seek an adjusted result for the hand we just played. Principled players do their best to ignore their partner and play at a consistent tempo, in order to avoid exchanging unauthorized information – and, if they do end up noticing something they shouldn’t have noticed, they go out of their way not to exploit it. Unprincipled players consciously take advantage of such information. And, occasionally, they go a great deal further than that.

If you attend the spring North American Bridge Championships, which will be held in Reno in March, you won’t hear any mention of prize money, because there is none. The world’s best players earn hundreds of thousands of dollars a year, but the money is in salaries and other fees paid by wealthy team sponsors and ‘clients,’ whose only goal is glory. Steve Weinstein, who is fifty-two and has been one of the highest-ranked players in the world for more than a decade, told me that, because rich bridge addicts outnumber great players, competition for the services of the top pros can be intense. Weinstein worked as an options trader on Wall Street before switching, after 9/11, to bridge and poker full time. The team that he plays for is financed by Frank T. (Nick) Nickell, the chairman of Kelso & ►



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Company, a private-equity firm in Manhattan. (Nickell himself plays on his team, and was inducted into the American Contract Bridge League's Hall of Fame in 2008.)

The first American full-time professional bridge team, called the Dallas Aces, was formed in 1968 by Ira G. Corn, Jr., a Texas businessman. The pay wasn't spectacular: a thousand dollars a month for married players, somewhat less for bachelors, plus travel and tournament expenses. Corn assembled his team because he was upset that, for more than a decade, the game had been dominated by a group of Italian players known as the Blue Team. The Dallas Aces won the World Teams Championship in 1970, and again the following year. Those victories were all the more impressive because the Aces were convinced that the Blue Team was cheating, although no members of the team were ever formally charged. Bob Hamman, who played on the Aces and now, in his late seventies, is universally considered to have been one of the best bridge players ever, told me, 'The Blue Team had two outstanding players and one very good player, but the other three were essentially from central casting.' He conjectured that the Italians used a number of illicit signals, involving things like hand gestures and the positioning of their cigarettes. In 1975, two members of a later version of the Blue Team were caught signalling under the table with their feet; they've been known ever since as the Italian Foot Soldiers.

An American player told me that the Blue Team's cheating might be considered an inevitable consequence of Italy's unusual card-playing culture. In *briscola*, a popular trick-taking game, one of the objects is to surreptitiously pass information to your partner, without being observed by an opponent. (In one signalling system, tightening the lips over the teeth shows an ace, glancing upward shows a king, and shrugging one shoulder shows a jack.) But, over the years, plenty of non-Italians have been caught cheating, too. One notorious incident took place in Buenos Aires in 1965, at a major international tournament called the Bermuda Bowl, and involved Ter-

ence Reese, who is still widely regarded as perhaps the best English player in the history of the game. Dorothy Hayden – a great player herself, who was later married to Alan Truscott, the *Times*' bridge columnist for forty-one years – determined, by watching them play, that Reese and his partner were showing each other how many hearts they held by positioning their fingers in particular ways when they fanned their cards.

In 1970, Henry Itkin and Kenny Rhodes, a relatively unknown American pair, suddenly began achieving results that better players believed were beyond their capabilities. Their code was cracked by Steve Robinson, a well-known tournament player, who realized that, when Rhodes sorted his hand after picking it up, he moved the cards in a way that telegraphed his entire holding to Itkin. Robinson told me that he had observed them during a tournament without being able to decipher what they were doing, but as he drove home afterward he reviewed a hand in his mind, and the system suddenly came to him. 'If he took cards from the right and put them back in the right side of the hand, that represented one,' he said. 'Right to the center was two, right to the left was three. Center to the right was four.' The signaller would give counts on three suits – first spades, then hearts, then diamonds – and then use similar movements to show strength. The code was so complex that the pair usually used it in just one direction (only Itkin could reliably read it). In 1979, two other American partners, Steve Sion and Alan Cokin, were caught signalling to each other with their scoring pencils, and were expelled from the American Contract Bridge League. 'Steve Sion was one of the best declarers in the game,' Paul Linxwiler, the executive editor of *Bridge Bulletin*, the A.C.B.L.'s monthly magazine, told me. 'But he hated the idea that a less talented player might beat him.' Sion and Cokin were reinstated after five years, and Cokin never got into trouble again. But Sion was thrown out permanently in 1997, after being caught doing the equivalent of stacking the deck with a tournament's pre-dealt hands.

Cheating scandals lead, inevitably, to enhancements in security. Even in games at local bridge clubs nowadays, bids are made not by speaking them (and possibly imparting unauthorized information through inflection) but by silently displaying pre-printed bidding cards. Hands at big tournaments are dealt not by people but by machines, and each deal is recorded, making tampering virtually impossible. For top matches at important tournaments, each table is fitted with a single diagonal screen, which prevents partners from seeing each other during the bidding and makes changes in tempo harder to interpret. And, because of the Italian Foot Soldiers, in big matches dividers are placed under tables as well as on top of them.

In 2014, two German physicians, who had won a World Pairs Championship, were banned for ten years by the World Bridge Federation for using an auditory signalling system. (They're now known as the Coughing Doctors.) Their method was so crude that they were relatively easy to catch, but, in general, as security measures have become more sophisticated, methods of evading them have become more sophisticated, too – like the arms race between e-mailers and spammers.

When Brogeland made his first announcement, his evidence against Fisher and Schwartz consisted solely of what he believed to be a collection of suspicious hands; he still didn't know how they might be exchanging information. A few days later, he created a new Web site, called *Bridgecheaters.com*, and posted three YouTube videos from the 2014 European Team Championships, which Fisher and Schwartz's team had won. Each video had been shot from a camera mounted near the table. It showed all four players, as well as the table paraphernalia of modern tournament bridge: four bidding boxes (containing each player's pre-printed bidding cards); a felt-covered bidding tray (on which the players place bidding cards before sliding it back under the screen); and a plastic duplicate board (a flat, rectangular box in which four pre-dealt hands have been delivered to the table). Brogeland asked for help from other players, and the search ►

for evidence immediately became a collaborative international project.

Not long after his Web site went up, Brogeland received a tip that Fisher and Schwartz had been in trouble before, when they were teen-agers. With aid from several players, he obtained documents showing that, beginning in 2003, the Israeli Bridge Federation had disciplined Fisher and Schwartz more than once for ethical violations in junior events. In 2005, Fisher was caught with a slip of paper containing information about a hand his table hadn't played yet, and the I.B.F. suspended him for two years, forbade him to represent Israel in bridge for an additional eighteen months, and placed him on probation for five years beyond that. Schwartz was also suspended and placed on probation in 2005, for a different offence. Yet, even before their probations were over, they had re-emerged as a pair.

As Brogeland had requested, players around the world studied the videos of Fisher and Schwartz – at first, without success. 'I thought it must be something electronic, because I couldn't figure it out,' Jeff Meckstroth told me. But Per-Ola Cullin, a young Swedish player, noticed something strange. I spoke with him on the phone recently, after his children had gone to bed. He said, 'I actually thought that Boye knew what they were doing, and was just trying to find out if others could see it as well. It turns out that he didn't know, but when I watched the video I kind of saw it right away.' The tactic that Cullin identified involved the opening lead, one of the most difficult plays in bridge, because it usually has to be made with no knowledge of the other hands except what has been deduced from the auction. A bridge player who somehow found the ideal opening lead on every hand would be like a tennis pro who never missed a first serve.

One day last month, I asked Weinstein to show me the code that Cullin had broken. He and his wife live in a big house on the outskirts of Andes, New York, a tiny town not far from where he grew up, but I visited him at a smaller house, in a suburban neighborhood in New Jersey, which they recently began renting, mainly

to shorten Weinstein's many trips to and from the airport. The furnishings consisted of little more than a couch, a coffeemaker, and a big round table. I'd brought a bidding tray and a duplicate board to use as props. 'When the bidding is over, you have to get these things out of the way,' Weinstein said, demonstrating. 'The pair sitting North-South almost always handles that – and Fisher and Schwartz always wanted to sit North-South.' Usually, North moves the bidding tray to the floor or to a nearby chair, and puts the duplicate board in the center of the table, directly under the screen.

On deals in which Fisher and Schwartz ended up as declarer and dummy, they cleared away the tray and the board in the usual manner. But when they were defending – meaning that one of them would make the opening lead – they were wildly inconsistent. Sometimes Fisher would remove the tray, and sometimes Schwartz would, and sometimes they would leave it on the table. Furthermore, they placed the duplicate board in a number of different positions – each of which, it turns out, conveyed a particular meaning. 'If Lotan wanted a spade lead, he put the board in the middle and pushed it all the way to the other side,' Weinstein said. If he wanted a heart, he put it to the right. Diamond, over here. Club, here. No preference, here.' Using that key, a leading professional stayed up all night studying the hands, then published a detailed synopsis of the crucial plays in a post on Bridgewinners. A British Web designer, who plays recreationally, used that analysis to assemble an explanatory highlight reel, and uploaded it to YouTube.

The team on which Fisher and Schwartz played last summer was sponsored by Jimmy Cayne, the former head of Bear Stearns. (Cayne was criticized in the press during the global financial crisis for seeming to care more about bridge than about Bear Stearns. He stepped down shortly before the firm's collapse, and since then he's had fewer distractions.) After studying the videotapes, Cayne announced that he would drop Fisher and Schwartz from his team unless they were vindicated, and that he would willingly forfeit

everything he had won while they were employed by him.

As the scandal involving the Israelis was unfolding, Brogeland received an e-mail from Maaijke Mevius, a physicist in the Netherlands, whose specialty is astronomy. She said that the revelations about Fisher and Schwartz had got her wondering about other partnerships, and that she had studied other tournament videos available on YouTube. She was especially interested in Fulvio Fantoni and Claudio Nunes, who were then ranked No. 1 and No. 2 by the World Bridge Federation. Both players are Italian, but in 2010 they moved to Monaco after being hired to play on the Monegasque national team, which is led and financed by a wealthy Swiss businessman. Rumours about them had been circulating among bridge players for several years, and Mevius thought that her scientific training might enable her to spot something that others had missed. She told Brogeland that she had indeed seen something, although she wasn't an accomplished enough player to be sure of its significance. What she had noticed was that, when either Fantoni or Nunes made an opening lead, he sometimes placed the card on the table horizontally, and sometimes vertically.

Brogeland followed up, with help from a number of other top players. Meckstroth told me that he had been convinced since 2014 that Fantoni and Nunes were cheating. He said that he had been trying for a year, without success, to persuade the A.C.B.L. to investigate them, and had spent many hours studying tapes himself, but without spotting the opening-lead pattern. With Mevius's clue, though, the cheat became obvious: in eighty-two of eighty-five videotaped hands, Fantoni or Nunes led a card vertically when his remaining holding in the same suit contained an ace, a king, or a queen, and horizontally when it didn't. Weinstein asked a bridge-playing math professor at the University of Chicago to calculate the probability of such a precise correlation's occurring by chance. The professor, in an e-mail, said that the number was 'so small it is not worth working out exactly,' but that it would be roughly '.0000 . . .

where at least the first eighteen digits are zeros.’ (Fantoni denied all allegations of cheating by him and Nunes.)

A few days after the accusations concerning Fantoni and Nunes, another leading pair, Josef Piekarek and Alex Smirnov, of Germany, confessed that they had been cheating. They said they were ‘aware of the ‘whispers’ ‘ about their ‘ethical conduct,’ and that these whispers contained ‘some truth.’ In fact, there was more than some truth, and their confession wasn’t entirely voluntary. Brogeland had compiled evidence – one of their signals involved placing their bidding cards in unusual positions on the bidding trays – and he and Weinstein had given them an opportunity to step forward before being outed. Their entire team withdrew from the World Bridge Championships, which were to begin a week later, in Chennai, India. I’ve watched, also on YouTube, a remarkable video in which Piekarek and Smirnov are playing Fisher and Schwartz in a tournament match, and Fisher appears to catch Smirnov trying to cheat. Smirnov places a bidding card on the bidding tray in an unusual position, and Fisher apparently obliterates the signal by shaking the tray as he slides it to the other side of the screen. Fisher smirks, then writes something on a piece of paper and shows it to Smirnov. Smirnov shrugs, glances at the video camera, and looks around the room.

The damage that Lance Armstrong did to the careers of other competitive cyclists, and to cycling itself, is incalculable, and it seems conceivable that the sport will never fully recover. The recent alleged cheating incidents in bridge are in some ways just as egregious. ‘The thing about Fantoni and Nunes that’s so upsetting,’ Weinstein told me, ‘is that they xxxxxx up the game since 2002, when they won the World Open Pairs, so for a decade and a half, almost, they have ruined the records of bridge.’ Yet virtually every player I’ve talked to, Weinstein among them, views the recent incidents as highly positive events. Effectively pursuing bridge cheaters used to be dif-

ficult, partly because the governing bodies were fearful of being sued, and partly because cheating could be extremely difficult to prove. Older players often exhibited what now seems like a fatalistic attitude about dishonest opponents, even in cases they believed to be obvious. But YouTube changed that, and Bridgewinners has given top-level players a global discussion-and-support forum – two empowering developments for honest players. In January, the American Contract Bridge League gave Brogeland its annual sportsmanship award.

The charges against Fisher, Schwartz, Fantoni, and Nunes are still officially only allegations: no national bridge organization has ruled on any of the current cases, and the four players have hired lawyers and prepared defences. (Fisher and Schwartz told Brogeland that they wouldn’t sue him if he retracted his accusations and paid them a million dollars; Brogeland has said that he would welcome a lawsuit.) A number of hearings have been scheduled, but even if no organization ultimately takes action, it’s unlikely that any of the players will compete again – certainly not as partners. ‘They’re done,’ one pro told me.

In the future, catching cheaters will presumably be more difficult. Several players I spoke with said that Fisher and Schwartz might have evaded detection indefinitely if they had been less brazen, and that the reason so many incidents were exposed all at once is that, until very recently, tournament videotapes weren’t readily available, and dishonest players didn’t understand their power. Now that they do understand, cheaters will become craftier in their deceptions, and the main tool for catching them will almost certainly be statistical analysis of suspicious results. It’s also likely that major bridge organizations will adopt binding-arbitration requirements, thereby eliminating the intimidation presented by lawsuits. Team sponsors could take that idea a step further, by adding ethics clauses to all of their player contracts.

Several players have proposed technological fixes, such as a computer-

ized tournament table, at which players wouldn’t use actual cards at all, and would bid and play roughly the way they do online. But tournament players I talked to said they would be reluctant to move the game so far from its analog origins. Brogeland told me that what he thinks the game really needs is a firmer cultural commitment to ethical play. ‘I think we should be more focussed on that,’ he said. ‘If you’re always trying things to make cheating more difficult, it’s like biting your tail.’ Bridge, in other words, should try to be more like golf, the only major sport in which players call penalties on themselves, and not at all like football, in which a running back would be considered almost negligent if he didn’t try to shove the ball a few inches farther forward after being tackled.

No matter what eventually happens, players today seem less resigned to unethical behavior by opponents than players of the past sometimes did – no doubt partly because, for the time being, they have the tools to fight it. Brogeland has set a powerful example, but the attitude he represents had been building for some time. Two years ago, after the World Bridge Federation banned the Coughing Doctors from competition, the overwhelming majority of responders to a poll on Bridgewinners said that, in proven cases of cheating, titles should be stripped from the cheaters’ teammates as well as from the cheaters themselves – a position that players and governing bodies in the past haven’t always embraced. And Weinstein told me that, at a tournament two or three years ago, Fisher approached him and said he understood that Weinstein had been telling people behind his back that he and Schwartz were cheating. ‘I said, ‘No, I’ll tell you to your face,’ ‘Weinstein continued. ‘I said I could show him fourteen hands on which I know he had cheated. He said, ‘Well, we don’t cheat – but what would you do if you were in my position?’ And I said, ‘I don’t know, Lotan. I really can’t relate to that, because I would never be in your position.’ ©David Owen 2016 ■

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